Symbols improve learning in schools

The diverse range of English language skills among pupils in today's classrooms presents a challenge to many teachers who are trying to teach the same curriculum to everyone.

Earlier this year reports highlighted a London school where 64 languages are spoken and four out of five children do not have English as their 'home language'. Across the UK one in seven youngsters does not speak English at home. And of course literacy skills vary widely among children whose first language is English too.

Text is used for assisting in the delivery of major sections of the curriculum and children who have difficulty with the written word are frequently frustrated by many aspects of school life including literacy work, understanding written and verbal instructions and completing worksheets for the curriculum. Separating out literacy problems from other tasks can significantly reduce these children's levels of frustration - and that's where communication aids such as symbols and synthesised speech can be invaluable to both children and teachers. An excellent selection of software is now available to help children understand the written information presented to them. It can help in improving behaviour and motivation, creating greater independence and giving children better access to the curriculum and learning.

By illustrating words, symbols can help a student to learn and recall information. This is particularly true for those students who operate more visually and whose visual memory may help to recall facts. Symbols can also help to remind students of a concept. The symbol itself cannot teach the concept, but once a concept has been understood, symbols can reinforce that understanding and help make the comprehension more permanent.

For example, in Warwickshire – where there is symbol supported learning in every school – teachers are finding that this aid to communication is empowering and motivating many students. Symbols have also been shown to have a role in managing behaviour by creating more effective ways for teachers to communicate with students.

Louise Wood, a teacher at Weddington Primary School in Warwickshire, said: "In a classroom we need to give students as much independence as we can. This is psychologically important for the student as well as purely practical for us as teachers. Students with literacy difficulties may also have difficulties in retaining verbal information, so we really need ways of providing printed information in a way that students can understand. Software which enables teachers to print off symbol- supported worksheets and visual timetables can greatly help provide information in this form, creating an accessible learning environment for everyone."

Cate Detheridge, product manager at Widgit Software, said: "The process of inclusion brings its own challenges. Students within the same class may have various degrees of learning and communication difficulties or may not have English as their first language. It's important for us to help provide 'Communication Friendly Environments' where barriers to communication are reduced or removed and all pupils are given the opportunity to listen, understand and express themselves. For example, we are working closely with key virtual learning environment (VLE) providers in line with the Government's e-strategy requiring every school to have a VLE by 2010."

• For further information visit www.widgit.com